



CONTEMPLATING THE AMERICAN WATERCOLOR

Selections from the Transco Energy Company Collection

 Transco Energy Company

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Painting techniques that have water as a medium and gum arabic as a binder have been known for centuries, but the word *watercolor* as a noun describing a single work of art did not appear until the 19th century. Today, watercolor is completing its second hundred years as an established medium, one that is accorded major museum exhibitions, the attention of serious collectors, and strong public enthusiasm.

Spontaneous, fresh, direct, luminous—these adjectives are regularly applied to jewellike works on paper whose visual appeal is almost irresistible. The works in this exhibition encompass watercolor's enormous expressive range, from the prim, tinted drawings of the early 1800s to the bold, free-flowing images of the modern era.

The essential materials required for watercolor are deceptively simple: brushes, paper, perhaps a scraper or eraser, and cakes or tubes of finely ground, water-soluble pigments mixed with gum arabic. These tools are relatively inexpensive, quite portable, even easily cleaned up.

Watercolor occupies a unique position, somewhere between drawing and painting. Drawn lines often are visible, either under or over the layers of color.

Wash, the classical English method, involves application of transparent stains one over another to obtain glowing gradations of color and tone. Light is reflected from the white paper through the washes, and unpainted paper provides the brightest highlights. Gouache, credited to the French, is an opaque water-base mixture, offering greater covering power and a closer approximation of oil-painting effects. At various stages over the past 200 years, first English, then French methods have been advocated, but many artists freely combine both types of watercolor without regard to national boundaries.

While expressive watercolors gradually gained prominence in England during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, most early American watercolors were prosaic

topographical or travel sketches. By the 1850s, British and French drawing manuals, followed by American publications, stimulated American watercolorists to more ambitious efforts. The publicity received by J. M. W. Turner's work, championed by the English critic John Ruskin, furthered interest in the medium. Following Turner's success, artists made watercolors not only for albums and cabinets, but also for public exhibition. Technical improvements in paper and commercially prepared pigments also spread from England to America, boosting watercolor's popularity.

The same flood of instruction manuals that promoted watercolor helped to identify it as an amateur's medium. Watercolor is still frequently associated with Sunday painters. However, its demands prevent all but a few artists from really mastering it. Paper is an unforgiving surface, one that allows few mistakes. The work must be executed quickly, with very few changes. Hence, watercolor's often-praised spontaneity.

In 1866 the American Society of Painters in Water Color was founded to encourage the creation and exhibition of works in this medium. The first significant American collections were started in the 1870s. Today, a number of major museums boast important holdings, notably the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Brooklyn Museum. But perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of watercolor is the possibility of assembling a collection of beautiful and exciting pieces even today. Over the past few years, the Transco Energy Company of Houston has gathered a body of paintings that already encompasses the history of watercolor in America. As the collection grows, new acquisitions reveal further facets of watercolor's versatile range.

Vivid, lyrical, dynamic, sparkling—the paintings presented here invite contemplation. They offer enjoyable visual evidence that a deceptively simple medium, in the hands of a master, deserves the enthusiastic adjectives so often applied to it.

David Park Curry

Edwin Austin Abbey

1852-1911

Young Woman Contemplating in the Woods, 1879

10 x 12 in.

Inscribed, lower left: "E. A. Abbey 1879"

Abbey's technique reflects a common 19th-century artistic desire, to emulate oil painting in watercolor. Like an oil painter, working from dark to light, Abbey built up this finely detailed woman in opaque layers, laid with a tiny brush over the same thinly washed, green underground that tints the knoll where she sits. Opaque strokes in light greens, grays, and yellows help to define the grassy bank. Unlike most works in the exhibition, no bare white paper highlights the rich colors. Even the brilliant white letter and discarded envelope are opaque, painted in thick gouache.



E. A. Abbey 1875

Winslow Homer

1836-1910

Daughters of the Sea, 1883

14 x 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

Inscribed, lower left: "Winslow Homer 1883"

Like most watercolorists of his era, Homer relied on a pencil to establish his initial idea. He lightly sketched these fisherfolk before laying transparent washes over the graphite. Lines from the drawing are still visible around the two central figures. Homer reinforced other contour lines with a fine brush, sometimes making a slight change—the bottom edge of the painted basket is higher than it was in the drawing. An uncolored sketch of two men in a boat survives to the right of the central figures. Had the artist completed it, this element would have greatly weakened the monumentality of the two girls silhouetted against the sea. Wisely, Homer left the men out.



Thomas Moran

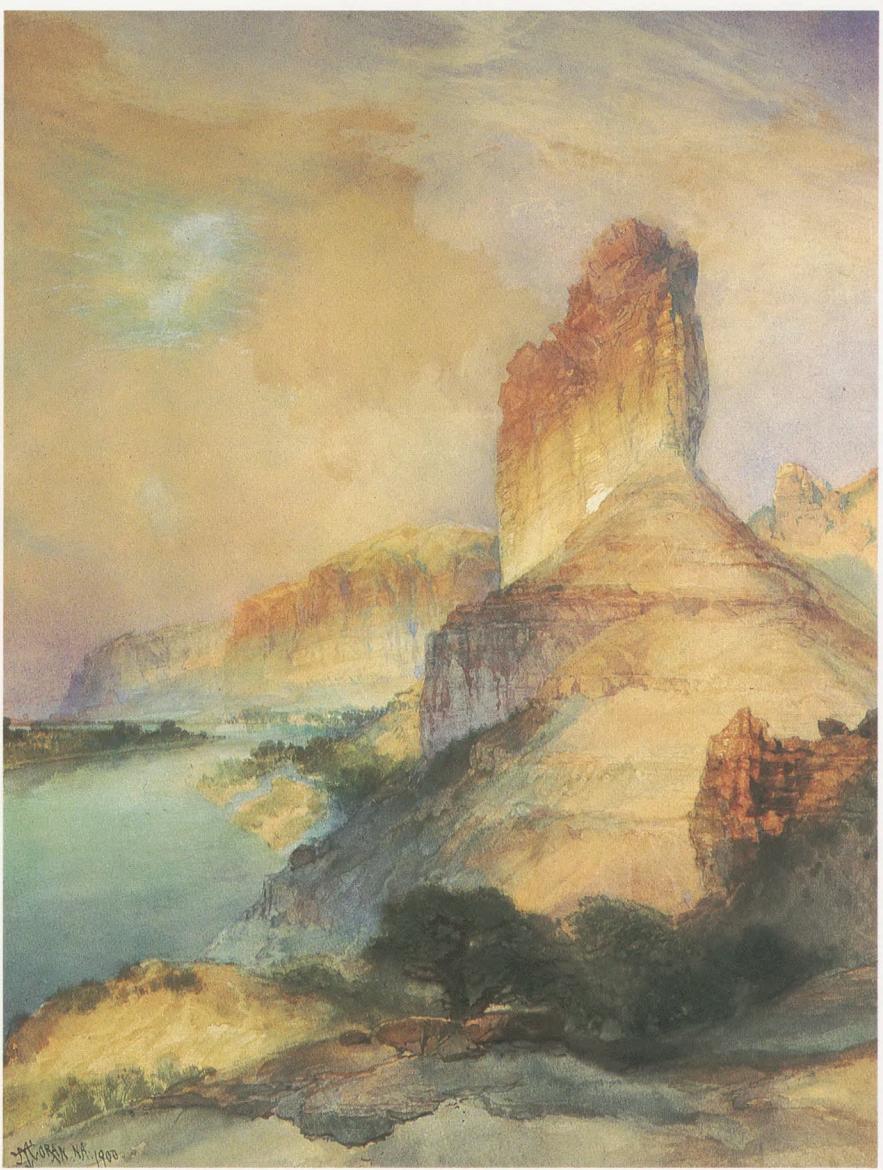
1837-1926

Castle Butte, Green River, Wyoming, 1900

19½ x 15¼ in.

Inscribed, lower left: "T Moran N.A. 1900"

Watercolors are painted much more quickly than oils. Moran's *Castle Butte* leaves us with an impression of high finish, but scrutiny reveals how rapidly the artist captured the scene, one of many such images he left behind. Moran chose a buff paper that establishes the general tone of the work without requiring a painted underground. Leaving plenty of bare paper in the sky and in sandbars along the river, the artist applied large patches of thin pigment with a very wet brush. Over the glowing swaths of highly contrasting red-oranges and blue, he laid down a gridlike series of thin strokes. These orangey-brown, purple, or black lines construct believable three-dimensional volumes out of massed color. A shadowy greenish area of trees and a few swift touches of white gouache for the brightest highlights completed the image.



Maurice Prendergast

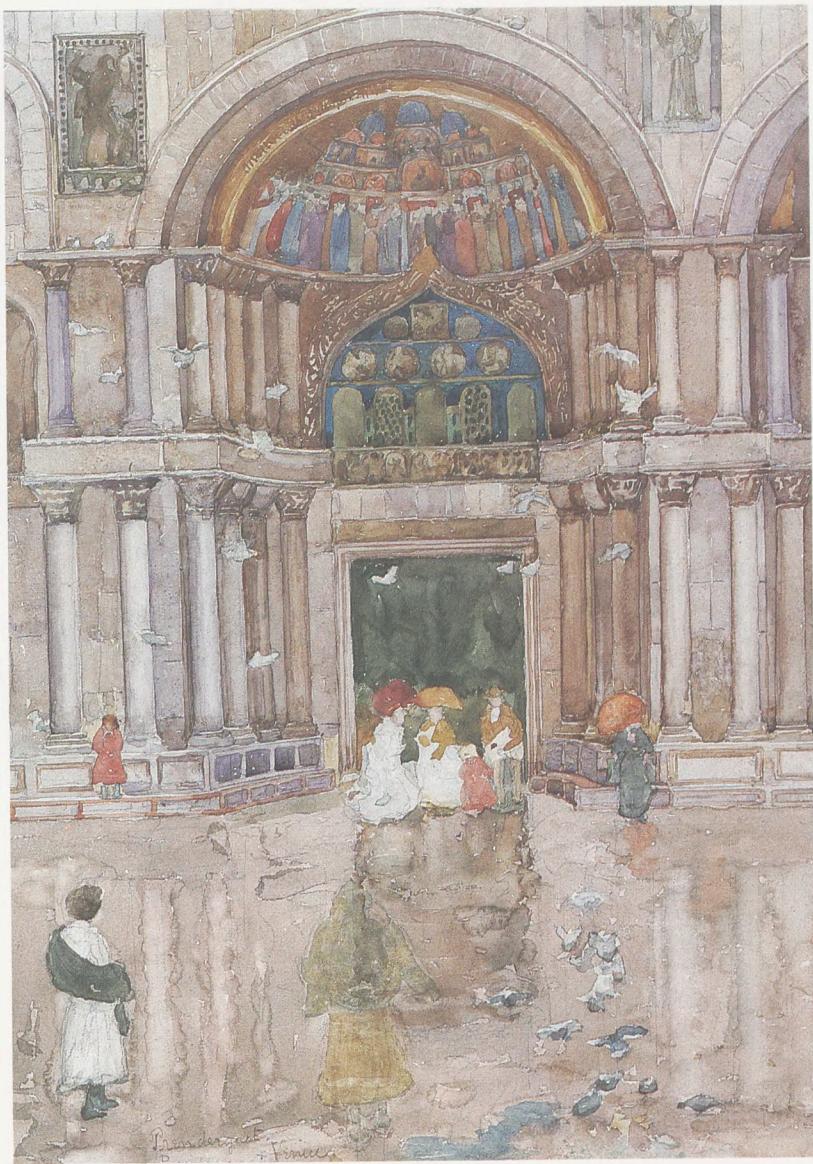
1875-1924

The Porch with the Old Mosaics, St. Mark's, about 1900

16 x 11 1/4 in.

Inscribed, lower left: "Prendergast" "Prendergast Venice"

A shimmering surface with white highlights showing through translucent washes is probably watercolor's most appealing characteristic. Here, Prendergast uses a saturated brush to capture a Venetian cathedral and its reflection in a rain-washed pavement. The luminous blues, reds, and yellows of mosaics, costumes, and umbrellas are sparked by bits of bare white paper that read as doves and dresses. Originally, the composition held three foreground figures. A completed figure stands at the left. At center, the partially eradicated ghost of a girl in ochre-yellow reveals a change of mind. Once the figure had been painted, Prendergast dampened and blotted the paper to minimize this element of the composition. At the right, two of the gray pigeons began as feet for the third figure, of which only tentative pencil traces remain.



Prandaryat
Jerusalem

John Singer Sargent

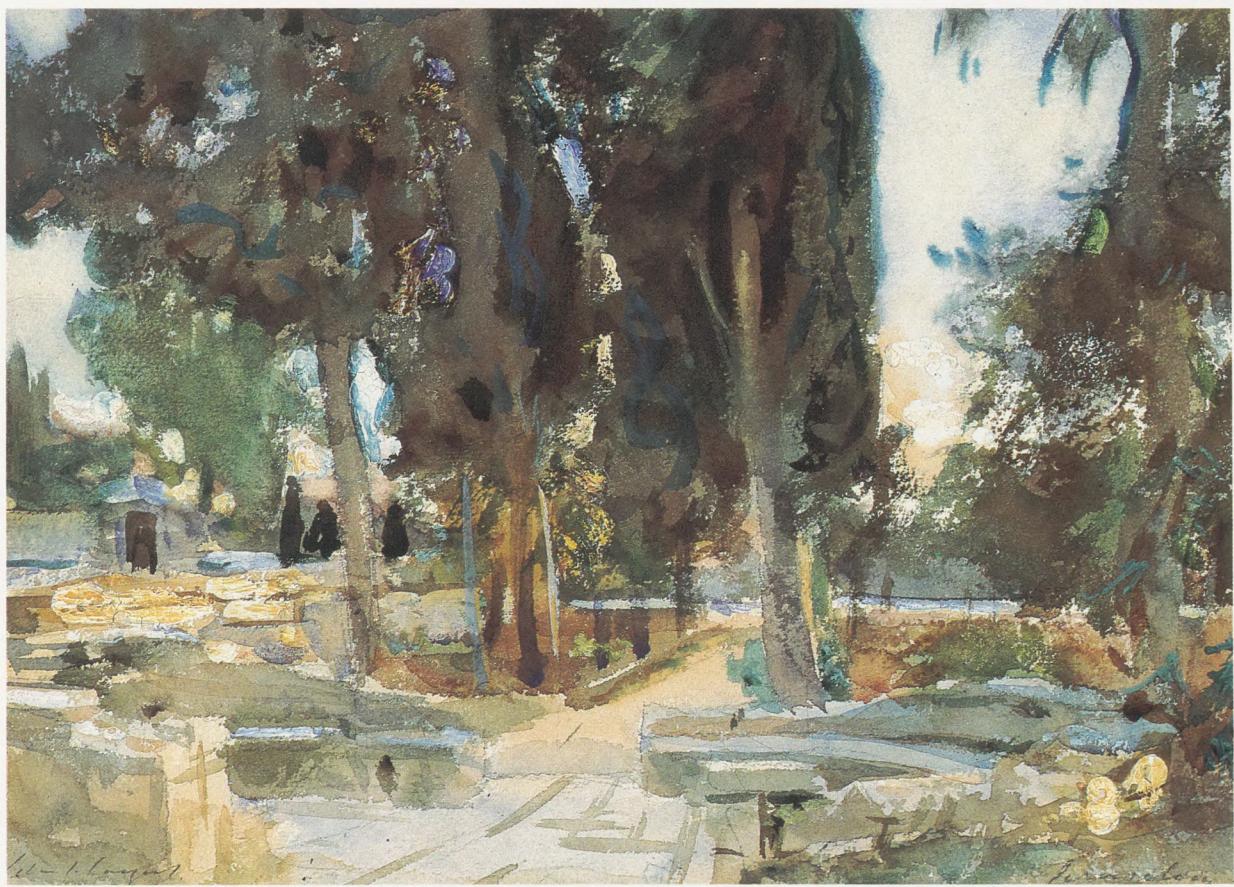
1856-1925

Jerusalem, about 1900

10 x 14 in.

Inscribed, lower left: "John S. Sargent" lower right: "Jerusalem"

The nature of watercolor demands rapid application of pigments. Only minimal reworking is possible. This spontaneity helps account for the medium's appeal to both artist and viewer. In Sargent's gestural or "calligraphic" brush, we sense the artist at work. Vigorous blue strokes over the foliage of the trees exist almost independently. Other blues, at the upper right, have been applied after the paper was heavily soaked. They seem to have bled into the porous surface just a moment ago. Several thick white areas of gouache indicate editorial changes to the composition. In one, just above the black figures, dark foliage has been replaced by pale sky. Sargent brought these areas back into balance by going over them with a thin brush dipped in yellow, blue, or red watercolor. Despite his assertive brushwork, Sargent's composition resolves itself into a satisfying whole.



Samuel Halpert

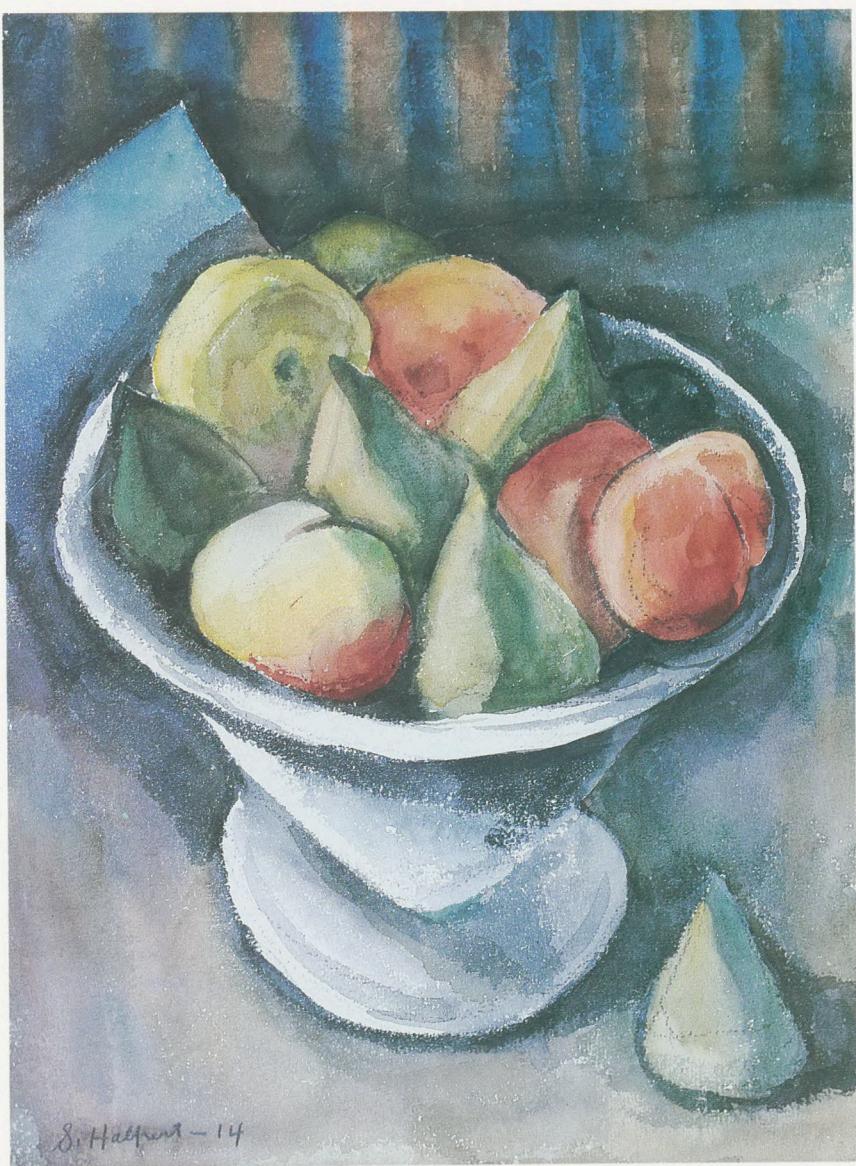
1884-1930

Fruit Bowl, 1914

15 x 11 in.

Inscribed, lower left: "S. Halpert - 14"

Halpert uses a combination of wet and dry brushwork to explore the formal properties of a bowl of peaches and pears set against striped wallpaper. The round and pointed fruits are echoed in the bowl itself, made of a cone poised upon a flat circle. The fruits are created in glowing washes edged with dark lines. For the silvery grays of the bowl, Halpert quickly brushed pigment over the rough "tooth" of the paper. As the color dried, trapped air bubbles broke, leaving little white highlights that enliven the surface. The upper part of the sheet was soaked before Halpert painted the pink and blue stripes, which bled into one another to soften their otherwise harsh lines.



S. Halpern - 14

Charles Ephraim Burchfield

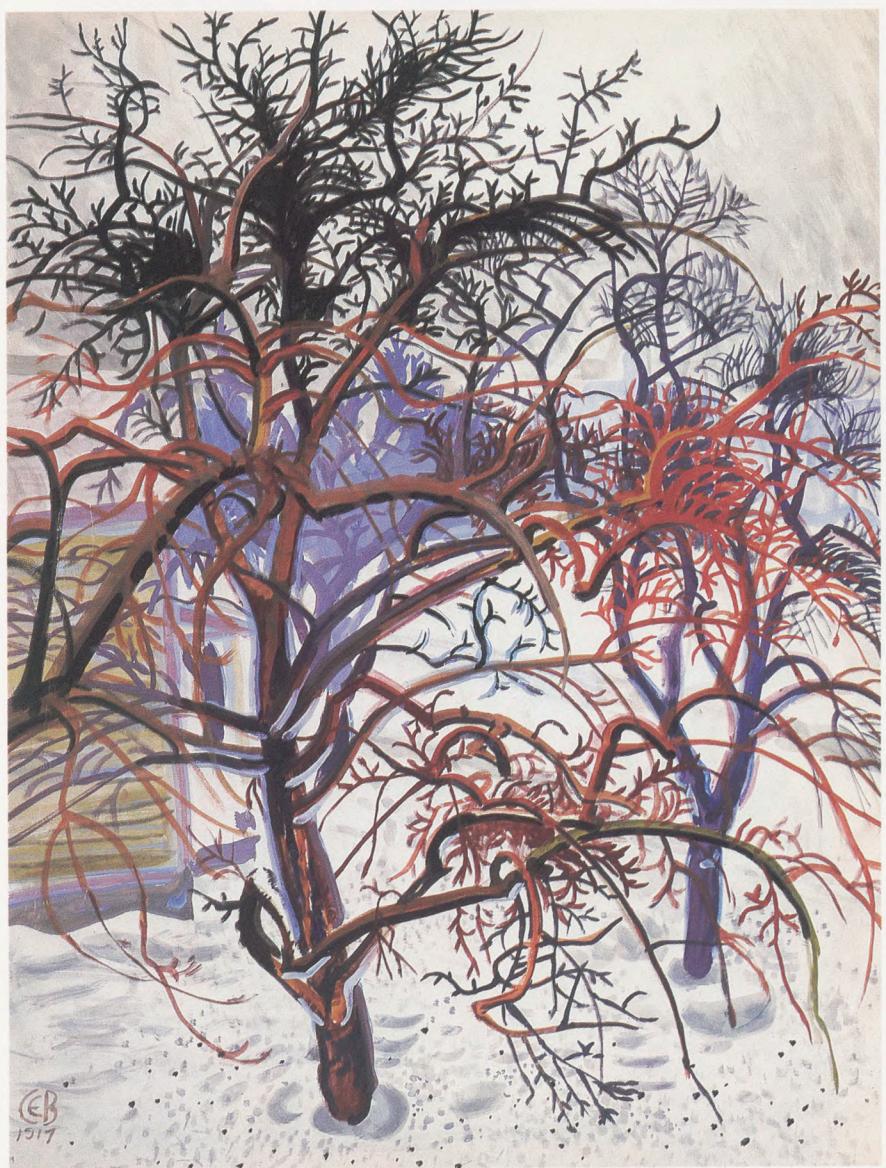
1893-1967

Trees, 1917

26 x 20 in.

Inscribed, lower left: "CEB 1917"

Burchfield applied smooth strokes of opaque gouache, transforming humdrum backyard trees into a sinuous network of lively lines that record his poetic response to nature. The energetic branches in mauve, olive, coral, and black contrast sharply with the pale ochres and grays of the static, man-made structure to the left. Like living bark over heartwood, Burchfield's painted branches shoot up in layers—from the underlying mauve to the bright coral that was the last layer he applied. One color completely covers another in some places. Burchfield's painting demonstrates the strength of dense gouache for a dynamic visual image.



Thomas Hart Benton

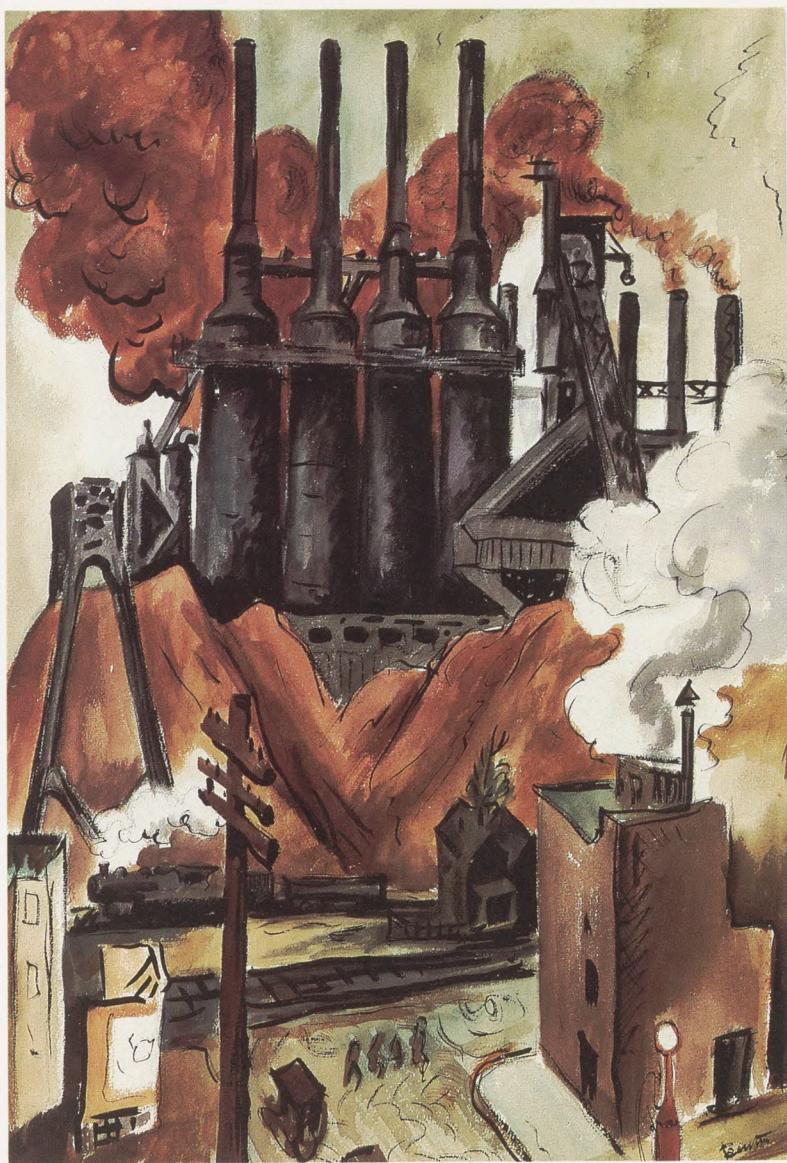
1889-1975

Blast Furnace, Western Pennsylvania, about 1928

21 1/2 x 14 3/4 in.

Inscribed, lower right: "Benton"

Watercolors are hard to classify. They often include techniques of both painting and drawing. Here Benton combines color and line to create a strident image of blast furnaces by covering brilliant white paper with wet washes before drawing over them with bold black lines. Benton's energetic brushwork celebrates the subject, American industrial might. Taking a precarious viewpoint reminiscent of the steep hills around Pittsburgh, he evokes various kinds of machine-age power. A railway steam engine drives through the midground while an attenuated red gas pump in the lower right corner witnesses the importance of the automobile. America's industrial power was based upon steel production. Appropriately, Benton uses a series of zig-zag diagonals to lead the eye to the towering stacks, painted in gorgeous steely blues, purples, and blacks and bracketed by the brilliant rust reds of slag heaps and belching fumes.



Edward Hopper

1882-1967

Vermont Sugar House, 1938

13½ x 19½ in.

Inscribed, lower left: "Edward Hopper"

Modern watercolor papers can withstand rigorous techniques of soaking, scraping, sanding, and rewashing. This sheet was quite wet when Hopper applied the initial layers of color, especially in the foreground and on the long plane of the sloping roof at the far right. In the most shadowy areas, the paint is built up until it is heavy and dense. Just above the diagonal hillside, Hopper scratched through thick blue paint down to the white paper—little vertical lines suggest waving grass. Hopper also scraped or sanded white highlights along the window sill. The shingled roof was created in a single wash of uniform gray, detailed with horizontal blue stripes. To obtain highlights, Hopper then rewashed an area to the left of the cupola. After removing most of the gray pigment, he redrew the blue stripes. Throughout all these treatments, the sheet remained flat, suggesting that Hopper properly stretched his paper on a drawing board before setting to work.



EDWARD HOPPER

Milton Avery

1893-1965

The Bathers, late 1940s

20 x 24 in.

Inscribed, lower left: "Milton Avery"

Even though the scene is a watery one, Avery has painted it with the driest possible brush. Throughout the work, brushstrokes retain their shape to exist independently. Avery touched down his colors lightly, barely brushing the rough paper. Only the highest points of the sheet's toothy surface were stained. Air, trapped in the hollows, bubbled through the drying wash to leave hundreds of tiny white highlights that add sparkle to what would otherwise be dull monochrome surfaces. Avery did saturate his brush before painting each figure's face to draw the viewer's attention there. But the wettest area, at the top of the composition, indicates that he made some changes in the far distance, then minimized them with a layer of dark black pigment.



Further Reading

Cohn, Marjorie B. *Wash and Gouache. A Study of the Development of the Materials of Watercolor.* Cambridge, Mass., 1977.

Dolloff, Francis W., and Roy L. Perkinson. *How to Care for Works of Art on Paper.* Boston, 1971.

Stebbins, Theodore E., Jr. *American Master Drawings and Watercolors. A History of Works on Paper from Colonial Times to the Present.* New York, 1976.

